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ABSTRACT

An approach to teaching foreign business practices combines two common approaches already used. It introduces the student to cultural patterns responsible for the way business is conducted abroad, and makes recommendations concerning appropriate behavior for specific situations. However, it also treats general culture and specific behavior as interrelated facets of a greater whole and emphasizes the client's responsibility to the foreign norms he will encounter. The method has seven stages: (1) familiarization with a cultural pattern shaping behavior and attitudes in the country in question; (2) identification of business traditions, norms, and rituals associated with the pattern; (3) introduction of related attitudes and behaviors; (4) consideration of the client's behavior in situations in which this cultural priority is operating; (5) presentation of situations in which the client must choose between two conflicting behavior patterns, based on consideration of cultural issues; (6) analysis of new behaviors, the possible motivations for them, and strategies to deal with them; and (7) preparation for becoming cultural observers and analysts, unlimited by specific cultural facts. (MSE)

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A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO TEACHING FOREIGN BUSINESS PRACTICES

by

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A Comprehensive Approach
to Teaching Foreign Business Practices

In recent years, American business educators and consultants have faced an increasing challenge to provide time-effective and practical instruction concerning foreign business practices. A great deal of effort has been made to provide information to the business community, but the need to develop a methodology for presenting this information in an effective and empowering manner has been largely overlooked.

Businesspeople or students preparing to do business abroad for the first time need guidance in two principal areas: in order to behave appropriately in an unfamiliar environment they need to become familiar with the protocol associated with a variety of business contexts, and in order to understand the attitudes of others and the feedback they receive from them, they need information concerning the factors that shape the behavior of businesspeople in the foreign country. This paper outlines a methodology designed to explain the interrelation between behavior and culture, and to make clear the function of the businessperson in his dual role as representative of his own interests, and adaptable business partner. My own area of specialization is Japan, and the examples I will use involve Japanese business practices, but the framework is equally applicable to other business cultures.

Two approaches to teaching foreign business practices have

predominated in the literature on the subject in the past decade. Consultants and authors fall into two general categories: They provide information based on practical experience, as is often the case with the publications of business professionals, or they base their advice on their knowledge of the culture of the country in question, as is the case with many academic authors and consultants.

Each of these approaches results in a methodology with a particular bias. Authors and consultants whose expertise derives from practical experience often provide lists of "tips" - of do's and dont's for interaction in the country in question. According to this approach, an American businessperson or student traveling to Japan might be advised not to call his Japanese hosts by their first names, to remove his shoes when entering a tatami mat room, and not to open gifts in the presence of others. The "useful tips" method has the advantage of conveying specific instructions in a short time, and the disadvantage of a lack of continuity. A client advised in this fashion is prepared for a very specific set of situations, but has no tools with which to develop strategies for dealing with the unfamiliar situations that inevitably arise in foreign business negotiations. A second drawback of this methodology is that it focuses on behavior alone, and fails to address the cultural considerations underlying the behavior. Clients must follow the advice of author or consultant blindly, without knowing why they do what they do.

Without an understanding of the motivations for the behaviors they will encounter abroad, they will be at a disadvantage in situations which require them to interpret others' intentions, reactions and motives.

The approach to teaching foreign business practices typically taken by academic authors and consultants focuses on the culture and traditions of the country to be visited. According to this approach, a client traveling to Japan might be given lessons on the Japanese concepts of obligation, conformity and respect for rank. This methodology has the advantage of providing clients with information they can use to analyze the behavior they observe in cointeractants, but often has the disadvantage of failing to provide them with guidance for their own behavior. Clients who have been prepared in this manner often feel that they must discard their native culture and behave strictly according to the norms of the foreign culture. Furthermore, they are often at a loss to understand how the cultural patterns discussed interrelate to shape the behavior of foreign natives. Because of the linear manner in which cultural patterns are typically presented, clients may not know which cultural consideration takes priority when two are in conflict. For example, given the Japanese priority of fulfilling obligations to others, and the emphasis placed on participation in group activities, it may not be clear whether one should cancel a previously made appointment in order to participate in a group activity, or whether to bow out of the

activity in order to keep the appointment. A three-dimensional framework which considers cultural patterns as they relate to one another and shape the behavior of cultural natives is essential to providing the means for dealing with the complexity of intercultural business interaction.

The methodology proposed here to educate students and businesspeople is to some degree a synthesis of these two methods. It introduces the student or client to cultural patterns responsible for the way business is conducted abroad, and makes recommendations to the client concerning appropriate behavior for specific situations. However, it treats general culture and specific behavior as interrelated facets of a greater whole. It provides a framework in relation to which the two are considered together, along with the client's responsibility to the foreign norms he will encounter. This integrative teaching methodology, or ITM, addresses issues which are typically ignored in other frameworks. One of these issues is to what degree clients are expected to alter their behavior in order to conform to foreign norms. Clients are understandably hesitant to relinquish behaviors that have served them well throughout their lives and adopt others on the advice of an author or consultant. It is important that a client's goal be not to successfully impersonate a native of the foreign country, but to develop an understanding of the differences in attitudes and behavior he will encounter in that country, in order to avoid doing things that serve as symbols

of rudeness or bad taste, and to convey the message that he possesses the qualities that are desired in a business partner by members of the business community there, just as he would at home. Furthermore, the ITM methodology is designed to equip clients to assess situations not addressed in their training, to discern cultural patterns for themselves and to devise strategies for dealing with them on their own - to become, in a limited sense, cultural anthropologists.

The ITM approach comprises seven stages. First, clients are made familiar with a cultural pattern which shapes behavior and attitudes in the country in question. Second, business traditions, norms and rituals associated with this pattern are identified. In stage three, attitudes and behaviors related to that cultural pattern are introduced. In stage four, the issue of the client's own behavior in situations in which this cultural priority is operating is considered. Each of a set of cultural patterns is thus discussed in light of of rituals and traditions, behaviors and attitudes clients will come across, and strategies they may use so as not to violate important cultural norms. This progression is designed to acquaint clients with cultural patterns in such a way that they are perceived not as abstract concepts, but as real-life considerations that motivate the choices made by natives of that culture, and which shape their attitudes towards conducting business.

Once clients are acquainted with a set of cultural

patterns and the behaviors that stem from them, the question of conflicting priorities is discussed. In stage five, situations are described in which a choice must be made to behave in a way consistent with one of two conflicting patterns, and clients are asked to identify the cultural issues present and devise strategies for resolving the conflict. Stress is placed not on making the right choice, but on developing a sensitivity to the issues raised in the scenarios, so that the cultural priority not honored by the choice can be addressed in some other way - through apology, rescheduling an appointment, or whatever, so that the business relationship is not damaged. This step is designed to empower clients to make educated decisions concerning their own behavior in light of the norms of the culture in question. In doing so, they are not pretending to be members of that culture, but are simply reacting to what they recognize as the priorities presented by the situation. It is not contrary to American values to choose to go out to dinner with business associates when one is very tired, if those associates feel a need to cement the personal relationship between them. What makes the educated American businessperson in Japan different from the naive one is his awareness that developing a relationship of respect and mutual trust is an important priority for his Japanese associates, based on his knowledge of Japanese business culture. At the same time, he must make his own needs for business clear, so that the interaction will be a mutually satisfying one.

In stage six, a scenario is described in which behaviors not previously discussed are presented to clients. They are asked to suggest possible motivations for these behaviors, based on the cultural awareness they have developed, and to develop strategies for dealing with them successfully. They learn to analyze others' behavior in light of their training, and to judge others' attitudes and reactions accordingly.

Finally, clients are taught to become observers and analysts of the foreign business culture, and are freed from the limitations of the specific instruction they have been given. This is a particularly important feature of the ITM approach, because it is impossible to prepare a businessperson for every situation he might encounter. Once clients have the tools necessary to develop an understanding of the foreign culture on their own, they are able to function abroad with much less coaching than would be necessary otherwise, and need not rely on the necessarily incomplete lists of tips that are often recommended when time is short.

To demonstrate the ITM process, the following is an abridged example of the development of a client's analytical skills. As before, the examples are taken from Japanese business culture.

Stage 1: A client might be provided with information concerning two cultural priorities encountered in Japanese business interactions such as the following:

a) It is a cultural priority in Japan not to impose on others.

b) The Japanese avoid contributing to the loss of face of others.

Stage 2: After a discussion of these patterns, the client would be made familiar with associated behaviors and attitudes. These might take the following form:

The Japanese are careful not to impose their feelings on one another. They avoid showing emotion, and tend to keep their opinions to themselves. They are hesitant to ask others for favors, and are quick to retract requests if they seem inconvenient for others. They avoid overt criticism of others' behavior or ideas.

The behavioral manifestations of these two cultural patterns thus limit straightforward communication between interactants.

Stage 3: Rituals or traditions that relate to the cultural patterns identified in Step 1 are now introduced. An example of such a ritual might be the way the Japanese circumvent the aforementioned norms in order to develop interpersonal relations with one another. It might be pointed out that it is very important to Japanese business that close interpersonal ties be formed among potential business associates, and that this is difficult, as long as participants are observing the

conventions for not imposing on one another. Clients would learn that to facilitate the development of interpersonal relationships, the drinking party has become institutionalized as a safe context for self expression, that when participating in social drinking, honest and open interaction is in order, and that it is a convention that what one says under the influence of alcohol may not be held against him.

Stage 4: Appropriate behaviors for the client are considered in this stage. It might be pointed out, for example, that since complaints are considered an imposition on others, one should refrain from discussing irritations and problems openly. Bluntness should be avoided, and criticism even of people not present should be very indirectly stated. By the same token, a client invited to participate in a drinking excursion would be advised to accept if possible, and to participate in the drinking, to speak more honestly and freely than usual, and to be prepared to receive important communication from his Japanese counterparts.

Stage 5: At this point, a scenario is described in which two priorities appear to be in conflict. An instance of such a scenario might be one in which straightforward communication with a Japanese contact seems essential to dealing with a negotiations problem that worries the client. Given the cultural limitations on such communication, the client would be

asked how one might approach a Japanese contact on a one-to-one basis and facilitate more direct interaction. A list of solutions would be elicited and discussed. None of these would be considered the "right" answer, but would be discussed rather as possibilities whose effectiveness could depend on many other factors. The ITM method stresses the need for the client's constant observation of his business associates' attitudes towards the business interaction, and his assessment of what will be appropriate, given the many variables operating in any social situation.

Stage 6: The next step in preparing a client involves confronting him with with a behavior that has not yet been discussed. He will attempt to interpret it in light of the cultural patterns he has learned about, and devise strategies for dealing with the situation in which the behavior arises. Such a scenario might take the following form: The client makes a suggestion to a Japanese business partner, who replies that while it is a good suggestion, there might be some problems if it is carried out. When asked to be more specific about the nature of these problems, the contact becomes embarrassed and uncommunicative. The client would be asked what might account for this behavior, and what might be done to resolve the potential conflict.

The client might observe that, given the cultural priorities of not imposing on others and of not causing others

to lose face through criticism, his Japanese counterpart might be trying to indicate indirectly that the suggestion is not a good one, so as not to hurt the client's feelings. Under these circumstances, it would be inappropriate to press the contact for an answer. Alternatives might include asking him for suggestions of his own, or asking whether he knew of anyone else who might be able to help, and so on.

The scenarios presented here appear very two-dimensional, given the limited number of cultural patterns discussed. In the course of normal training, a client would be introduced to a range of cultural patterns, any of which might be in part responsible for the behavior others exhibit, and for the particular alternatives which would be acceptable solutions to a given problem. Obviously, the more cultural patterns, attitudes, traditions and so on the client is familiar with, the better equipped he will be to deal with real-life situations. However, once the framework of interaction between culture and practice has been established, his ability to problem solve increases considerably as he acquires new pieces of the cultural puzzle.

Stage 7: The final step in preparing a client for interaction in a foreign culture is to advise him on ways to gather and analyze information for himself when consulting services are not available. In this stage, clients learn to identify behaviors they are not familiar with, and to enlist the aid of

a native of the culture in question. Clients must be trained to ask questions that will help their informants identify cultural factors that the informants themselves may not be aware of. They must investigate whether or not the behavior is perceived by informants as normal or idiosyncratic, and if it seems normal, they should try to discern the cultural factors responsible for it. If they are able to isolate a cultural pattern, they can then integrate it into the network of patterns they are already familiar with, and thereby enhance their ability to interpret and respond to interactive behavior of members of the culture in general.

By addressing intercultural business interaction as a whole, the ITM method provides clients with information they can use immediately in situations they encounter abroad, and in the long term as well. By using the techniques it provides, clients are able to develop a holistic characterization of the foreign culture, which they can develop as their interactions abroad continue. This helps free them from the limitations of training programs and consultation services, and lessens the need for repeated consultation.

Training programs on international business sometimes give the impression that success in international business requires the development of saint-like tolerance for others' incomprehensible behavior. The ITM method, in contrast, effectively reduces the incomprehensibility aspect by

familiarizing the client with the cultural factors responsible for the behavior, and by demonstrating the relationship between culture and behavior in general. As clients develop an understanding of foreign practices, they become increasingly comfortable with them, and are thus empowered to meet the demands and challenges of international business, and to achieve success in the foreign marketplace.

Biography

Deirdre Brown Mendez, a native of Florida, received a PhD from the University of Texas at Austin in sociolinguistics. She is the director of Foreign Business Management Consultants, a Texas-based firm which educates American companies about Japanese business practices. She is a lecturer in the department of French and Italian at the University of Texas.